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## PRESIDENT'S LETTER



By Kelly Elaine Navies

It's hard to believe summer is almost over and we are only two months away from the annual meeting in Cincinnati!

I have just been reading about the life of Benjamin Banneker, free African American scientist and mathematician who helped to survey the City of Washington, D.C., in Rachel Jamison Webster's book, *Benjamin Banneker and Us*. In this unique mix of memoir and

historical narrative she recounts the family history and genealogy of her Banneker ancestors by drawing upon oral histories and other sources, including Banneker's own writings.

Like many other free African American families in the post-Revolutionary era, the Bannekers became disillusioned with the lack of social progress, especially when they realized that the newly independent United States would not abolish slavery. So they moved to Ohio, as did a branch of my own ancestors. One thing I love about this book is Jamison's use of oral histories to craft her multi-generational narrative. This work is a good reminder that historians can and should also listen to voices that were not recorded but passed down orally and rarely, but sometimes documented.

I look forward to seeing you in Cincinnati and learning from your work as we make our own history on the banks of the Ohio River, following in the ancestral footsteps of freedmen and women, displaced Indigenous folk and immigrants from all over the world, looking to the past while envisioning our future.

And finally, we recently lost the great Dr. Bernice Reagon, founder of the acapella group Sweet Honey and The Rock and original member of the Freedom Singers. Her work, both as a historian and musician/composer, has had a tremendous impact on the field of oral history.

I leave you with this line from one of my favorite Sweet Honey in the Rock pieces, inspired by a poem written by June Jordan:

*We are the ones, we are the ones, we've been waiting for...*

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## DIRECTORS' COLUMN



### Executive Director's Report

By Stephen Sloan

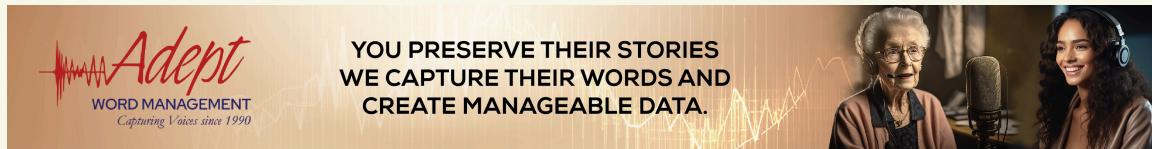
It is an ongoing priority among OHA leadership to expand the ways in which our organization serves our diverse membership and broadens member participation in our initiatives. The development of compelling virtual programming, such as the AI in Oral History Symposium, offers ways to engage more easily than in-person attendance at the annual meeting. Our plan going forward is to offer these symposiums biennially. The success of both the “Assessing the Role of Race and Power in Oral History Theory and Practice” in 2022 and the AI event this year have led us to commit to doing these biennially. We had 242 individuals registered for this summer’s symposium with teams from 13 OHA Partners participating as well.

To expand member engagement in the annual OHA business meeting, we are experimenting with a new format as well. Traditionally, this has been an early morning breakfast at the annual meeting with often poor attendance. This year, we will hold a virtual OHA business meeting in advance of the annual meeting on Oct. 1 from 3-4:30 p.m. CDT. More details to come on this event. The meeting will include a preview of the upcoming annual meeting in Cincinnati. Also, the passing of the gavel, a storied OHA tradition, will not transpire at the business meeting, but at the conclusion of the Presidential Reception on the Thursday evening at the Cincinnati Club.

An important change in our membership demographics has also occurred over the past year when Council voted to change non-member registration at the annual meeting to now include a one-year membership. This offers us a full opportunity to demonstrate to each conference attendee the value of an annual membership in our community. All attendees now stay in an extended conversation with us, receive our flagship publication, *The Oral History Review*, and experience the vibrant OHA activity that happens all year long. As a result, at the end of 2023, our membership reached an all-time high of 1,227 individual members and 42 partner members.

One category of membership that I would like to highlight is our life membership category. Years ago, OHA Council decided that all proceeds from life memberships should not be used to cover operating expenses but should be placed in the OHA Endowment. This membership was originally set at \$500 in 1987 and raised to \$1,000 in 2006. To keep in line with the rates of other professional organizations, OHA Council has agreed to raise the cost of a life membership to \$1,500. However, this will occur over a two-year period. So, until the end of 2024, you can still sign up at the \$1,000 rate, which will go to \$1,250 in 2025, before staying at the new rate of \$1,500 in 2026. Contributions made to a life membership are of a perpetual benefit to our community. The growth of our endowment is key to both the long-term stability of our organization and to expand the resources, programming and services that we offer. Our 90 life members have provided a great and ongoing stimulus to the health and operation of OHA.

The work of OHA needs to attend to all facets of our membership. In the past year alone, we have provided our independent practitioners with the Find an Oral Historian Tool, served our campus-based oral historians through publishing the “Guidelines for the Evaluation of Professional or Academic Oral Historians for Promotion, Tenure, or Other Review,” and advanced our understanding by deliberating the impact of developments of AI on our practice. We are at our best when we have good representation and engagement from the broad spectrum of oral historians, and we remain ever committed to more fully reach that goal.



## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT ELLEN BROOKS



### **On being an OHA volunteer**

Ellen Brooks has been immersed this year in all things OHA as chairman of the fall OHA conference in Cincinnati. She came to oral history after double majoring in history and communications at Fordham University and then earning a master's degree in oral history from Columbia University. She worked as the oral historian for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum from 2013-2018 and then served as oral historian for the State Archives of North Carolina from 2019-mid-2020 when she began a career as a freelance contractor and consultant based in Chicago. Learn more about Ellen from her website, [brooksbabbles.com](http://brooksbabbles.com).

### **How and when did you first get involved with oral history?**

In 2012 I started the Oral History Master of Arts program at Columbia. I was looking for a degree that combined my interests in public history, folklore, and community building. How and when did you first get involved with the OHA?

I first attended an OHA annual meeting in 2012 as a grad student. From these early experiences I (along with Erica Fugger and Kristen La Follette) recognized a need to provide newcomers to OHA with some guidance and support. The result of our conversations was the first OHA Mentor Pairing Program in 2014, partnering newcomers with veteran professionals during the annual meeting.

### **What OHA activities have you been involved with? Why those particular ones?**

Developing the Mentor Pairing Program led to the development of the Emerging Professionals Task Force, which eventually became the Emerging Professionals Committee (EPC). I served as chair of the EPC for several years.

I was on the Local Arrangements Committee in 2014. In 2018-2019 I was co-chair (along with Jennifer Snyder) of the OHA's Archives Principles and Best Practices Task Force, which was responsible for producing OHA's "Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices," which was adopted in 2019. In 2022 I was tapped to serve on the Committee on Committees, a position I still hold.

Since 2022 I have been the Chair of the Conference Committee responsible for planning the 2024 OHA annual meeting in Cincinnati.

### **What has been the most rewarding aspect of volunteering for OHA?**

For me, volunteering with OHA is about welcoming new voices into the oral history space. I'm an advocate for networking and mentorship and many of my roles working with OHA have revolved around that, and it has been very rewarding to feel like I'm helping create a sense of community and support within the organization.

### **What has been most challenging about OHA volunteering?**

Volunteer positions, especially on committees, can be difficult because they involve a lot of scheduling challenges as well as the division of labor, which isn't always easy.

### **What advice would you give to an OHA newcomer about becoming an OHA volunteer?**

Sometimes volunteer work can be frustrating, especially if you are new to how everything works. Jump in and give it your best and know that you are SO appreciated! If anyone is curious about volunteering, I'd be more than happy to talk with them and share more thoughts and advice.

### **Other thoughts to share or stand-out memories from your OHA volunteer experiences?**

I volunteer for OHA because it has given me a professional home that I am extremely grateful for, and I like the idea of giving back, PLUS I really like the opportunity to work with colleagues and grow those relationships. I'd just like to say thank you to all the people I've worked with on the committees and task forces I've been a member of. I appreciate you!

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## **OHA Fall Conference Overview**

Nearly 100 program events with local to international flavors are on tap for the 2024 Oral History Association annual conference, set for Oct. 30-Nov. 2 at the Hilton Cincinnati Netherland Plaza. If you haven't already done so, click [here](#) to register now.

In addition to featured speakers at plenary sessions along with optional pre-conference workshops and tours throughout the four-day gathering, oral historians can choose from a plethora of panels set to explore:

- The importance of context in oral history
- Voices from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration oral history archives
- Indigenous data sovereignty
- Inclusion of the deaf community in oral history
- Ethics in editing First Nations oral history transcripts
- Japanese American intergenerational narratives
- Curating oral histories with data and AI
- Examining best practices for conducting oral history at a distance
- Experiences of reproductive and gender care in Minnesota
- Oral history research in the Virgin Islands
- Experiences of residents in retirement communities
- Holocaust survivors in Cincinnati
- Oral histories of home moviemaking
- Stories of women, spirituality and social justice
- Challenges with archiving trans stories
- Finding lost stories
- Turning oral histories into podcasts

The list goes on, of course, meaning oral historians will have to choose from among simultaneous intriguing topics--a great problem to have. And if you do reach information overload, step outside the hotel to enjoy typical late October Cincinnati temperatures in the 50s in a vibrant river community that's worth exploring.

#### **What's new; what's familiar**

Oral historians accustomed to the patterns of annual OHA conferences will notice a few new things at the Cincinnati meeting. But there's plenty of familiar features to experience as well.

For starters, conference sessions will be offered in 60-minute formats as well as the customary 90-minute time slots. And new Project Spotlight sessions akin to lightning rounds will feature highlights from individual papers or projects that share similar features or connections.

Also, instead of an early morning annual business meeting attended sparsely by early rising members grasping for coffee, the business meeting is scheduled as a virtual afternoon session on Oct. 1, with more details to come.

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But attendees still can look forward to traditional features of the annual OHA conferences: evening social events, including a presidential reception and receptions hosted by the Diversity Committee and International Committee and other meet-and-greet activities; mentoring for newcomers; an exhibit hall; coffee and tea breaks; book signing; early morning yoga; and ample time to connect and reconnect with oral historians close to home or from around the world.

### **Cincinnati workshops**

Whether you're new to oral history and want to learn the basics or seek to upgrade your skills, you can benefit from one of the five pre-conference oral history workshops scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 30. Each workshop costs \$25, and you may sign up for them when you register for the conference.

The morning workshops include:

- **An Introduction to Oral History**, presented by Jeff Corrigan. The workshop will review specifics of oral history work before, during and after an oral history interview. Attendees also can hone interviewing skills by listening to a series of audio Q&A examples from oral history interviews to understand techniques that work and why they do.
- **Rates, Contracts, Portfolios and More: Activating the Independent Practitioners Toolkit to Create a More Sustainable Career**, presented by Sarah Dzedzic and Jess Lamar Reece Holler. Topics they will cover include how to: establish appropriate fees and negotiate pay and deliverables; develop scopes of work and contracts; protect your intellectual property; and decline unpaid or unfairly paid work. The presenters ask that people who attend this workshop wear face masks for Covid-19 safety.
- **The OurStoryBridge Methodology: The Bridge That Connects Communities, Generations, and Stories Across Time**, presented by Jerry Huntley. OurStoryBridge is an online tool enabling users to create crowdsourced, three- to five-minute grassroots audio stories with photos that can be published easily online. The methodology is intended to create connections between community members, particularly elders who have stories to tell, and younger generations who can learn from them. Stories can be available for classroom use with a teacher guide to facilitate the process.

Two afternoon workshops include:

- **Streamlining Oral History Integration with Omeka and OHMS (the Next Generation)**, presented by Sharon Leon. Oral historians, librarians and archivists will benefit from this introduction to an updated integration software for the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) and Omeka, an open-source web publishing platform. The workshop will show how the new, improved software offers a more streamlined process to embed oral histories into digital collections. It will include hands-on training and highlight best practices for metadata management, digital preservation and user interface design to engage wider audiences in oral history collections.
- **What does Done Look Like? Project Planning for Oral History**, presented by Jen Cramer and Doug Boyd. The workshop goal is for participants to leave the session with an implementation plan and resources for their particular oral history project. The focus is on logistics of planning and carrying out an oral history project and is especially useful for individuals or teams who are conceptualizing a project or who are already developing one. The workshop will include breakout groups along with peer and instructor feedback. The session is applicable for projects of any size or budget.

## Cincinnati tours

If you want to take a break from a jam-packed schedule of conference sessions or just want to explore some of Cincinnati's historic neighborhoods, museums and national landmarks, OHA conference planners are offering nearly a dozen choices of off-site tours available throughout the conference. Tours all require registration, and costs vary from \$15 to \$30.

### On Wednesday, Oct. 30, tour choices include:

- A one-hour afternoon walking tour of the **Cincinnati Music Hall** and its surrounding cityscape. Led by Thea Tjepkema, the Music Hall's historian and historic preservationist, attendees can learn about the High Victorian Gothic style of architecture and the role the building has played in the city's cultural life. The tour will be repeated on Thursday, Oct. 31.
- An afternoon tour of **Mount St. Joseph's Motherhouse and Mater Dei Chapel** on the campus of Mount St. Joseph University. The chapel is built in a mid-century modern style and is the only collegiate chapel designed and created by faculty and undergraduate students. Tour participants also will visit the Immaculate Conception Chapel, which dates from the late 1890s, on the grounds of the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, whose earliest members served as nurses during the Civil War. The chapel, built in the shape of a Latin cross, combines Romanesque and Renaissance architecture with remarkable domes, statues and a pipe organ. The tour also repeats on Thursday afternoon.
- An afternoon tour of the **Harriet Beecher Stowe House and Walnut Hills neighborhood**, where the 19th century abolitionist wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Learn more about the abolitionist and African American heritage of the neighborhood and the efforts of the Walnut Hills Historical Society and the Stowe House to preserve and enhance the neighborhood's stories.
- An afternoon tour of the city's historic **Over-the-Rhine neighborhood** settled in the 19th century by German immigrants. Wealthy residents now live in the formerly low-income neighborhood where the Over-the-Rhine Museum is using oral history interviews to preserve early stories of an increasingly trendy urban hotspot. The tour will focus on the neighborhood's **tenement life**.

### On Friday, Nov. 1, tour options include:

- A trolley and walking tour of the city's **Brewing Heritage Trail**, visiting some of the many breweries' 19th and early 20th century buildings. The tour includes a visit to the extensive subterranean lager cellars of the historic (now non-operating) Jackson Brewery, which were excavated into the hillside beneath the building, as well as several other locations that illustrate the evolution of the Cincinnati's brewing industry.
- A morning tour of the **Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center at Historic Union Terminal**, where many Holocaust survivors arrived by train during and after World War II, leaving their mark on the Cincinnati community. The museum features interactive exhibits that draw on decades of collecting regional oral histories.



**On Saturday, Nov. 2, tour options include:**

- A morning visit to the **National Underground Railroad Freedom Center**, adjacent to the Ohio River, which formed the boundary between free states of the North and slave states in the South. Opened in 2004, the museum tells the story of the Underground Railroad and works with a dozen other sites in Ohio and Kentucky to further knowledge about the search for freedom.
- A morning tour of the **Over-the-Rhine neighborhood** with a **focus on women** who have lived there, from German immigrants of the 1800s to the African American women who moved to the neighborhood in the 1960s. The tour will focus on topics like work for women, motherhood and childbirth, education and social activism.
- A morning tour of Cincinnati's **West End neighborhood**, once a vibrant African American community, about half of which was displaced beginning in the late 1950s by a massive urban renewal project. Tour attendees will visit remaining architectural and community resources in the West End and explore future community plans. An afternoon conference plenary session will feature presenters whose work focuses on preserving the historic West End.

**Keynote, plenary sessions explore disparate themes**

A keynote speaker and two plenary sessions will give OHA conference attendees chances to be inspired and to dig into national and local history themes.

On Thursday morning, Oct. 31, the keynote speaker is Mi'Jan Celie Tho-Biaz, a professional speaker, story gatherer, Kennedy Center Citizen Artist, and freelance consultant who works with policymakers, philanthropic organizations and community-based media and educational institutions. Tho-Biaz comes by her passion for stories honestly, noting that her grandma was a "story pusher" as a librarian on Chicago's South Side, her mother worked in radio and her father was a filmmaker and media producer.

With an educational background in psychology and multicultural education, she has worked as a social worker and public health worker and drew on those experiences as she turned to oral history. She collected oral histories for the Kennedy Center's 50th anniversary and now devotes her time to melding oral history, art and media to create cultural products that she says "honor our past, make meaning of our present and vision lovingly liberated futures."

On Friday afternoon, Nov. 1, oral historian Elena Foulis, assistant professor and director of Spanish Language Studies at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, will facilitate a discussion with two other Texas scholars about the past, present and future of Latina/o/x oral history in the United States.

The panelists are Maria E. Cotera, associate professor of Mexican American and Latino Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and Jesse Jesús Esparza, associate professor of history at Texas Southern University. Cotera's work includes a digital humanities project that centers on documenting Chicanas in the Movement years (1965-80) through collecting oral histories and archival objects. Esparza's work focuses on civil rights activism in the U.S. Latino community.

A Saturday afternoon plenary, Nov. 2, will give attendees a chance to learn about Cincinnati's historically African American West End neighborhood, which was once a hub for African and African American art, history and culture.

Presenters include:

- Toilynn O'Neal Turner, founder and CEO of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center, whose purpose is to preserve art, history and education in the historic West End;
  - Anne Delano Steinart, public historian and historian of the built environment at the University of Cincinnati's Center for the City;
  - Elissa Yancey, Cincinnati journalist and educator;
  - LaVerne Summerlin, University of Cincinnati English professor and
  - Keloni Parks of the Cincinnati Public Library's West End Branch, where she has conducted interviews and created podcasts titled "West End Stories," based on memories of men and women who grew up in the historic neighborhood.
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## Sponsors enable vibrant fall conferences

By Troy Reeves

OHA Vice President/President Elect

Our upcoming annual meeting, like all the others before it, can happen only with financial support.

Along with the meeting's registration fees, the other key revenue stream comes from organizations and individuals who sponsor, buy a program advertisement or purchase an exhibit table. So, we want to take a moment to thank all those, numbering more than 30 by mid-August, who chose one of those ways to help this year's meeting be as successful as possible, and we'll be lauding many of them specifically over our social media channels in these weeks leading up to Cincinnati.

And if you're interested in helping us in one of those three ways, please reach out to OHA's Program Associate Hailey Rowe at [oha@oralhistory.org](mailto:oha@oralhistory.org).

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## OHR reviewers needed

By Holly Werner-Thomas

OHR Editor in Chief

The *Oral History Review* is seeking book and media reviewers, and in particular, writers interested in oral history who can combine reasoned opinions with lively writing to cover contemporary work in the field across disciplines.

We are always on the lookout for reviews of current books that utilize oral history or address current developments in the field. You may choose from the selection of books we've received from publishers or suggest a recent title that you think is important. We also highlight influential work in the field through two occasional columns we are calling *Featured Reviews* and *Classics Revisited*.

If you are interested in reviewing books, contact Sharon Raynor, Book Review Editor, [ohrbookrevieweditor@gmail.com](mailto:ohrbookrevieweditor@gmail.com)

We also publish reviews of new or significant applications of oral history in settings other than in books—in theater, films, music, museums, art exhibits, podcasts, archives or other interactive presentations. Works to be reviewed ideally should present oral history effectively and be broadly available so that *OHR* readers can access and experience them in person, online, through archival recordings or other sources. If you are interested in reviewing media, contact Bud Kliment, Media Review Editor, [OHRMedia@outlook.com](mailto:OHRMedia@outlook.com).

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## OHA summer symposium explores role of artificial intelligence in oral history

Enthusiastic optimism to profound concerns--and a range of views in between--emerged in the summer Oral History Association virtual symposium on AI in OH, a weeklong series of panels exploring the intersection of artificial intelligence and oral history.

Some 250 individuals and organizations registered for the July 15-19 symposium, co-chaired by Steven Sielaff, OHA associate director, and Sarah Milligan, OHA first vice president. Links to recordings of the virtual sessions have been sent to all registrants who want to review the sessions or catch up with those they were unable to attend in real time. All OHA members will have access to the recordings behind the membership paywall beginning Jan. 1, 2025. Non-registrants who want access to the recordings sooner can still register for the symposium here: <https://oralhistory.org/2024/07/30/ai-in-oh-symposium-recordings-now-available/>

Throughout the symposium week, a wide range of presenters explored and analyzed disparate themes. Following are some examples of themes that emerged in some 20 hours of symposium sessions.

Several panels addressed questions of ethics involved in using AI tools in oral history. In one session, Mary Larson of Oklahoma State University emphasized the importance of retaining the context of oral history interviews and expressed concern about what she called the "datafication" of oral history, going beyond merely digitizing interviews, but turning oral history collections into data sets, appearing to make them more than the sum of their parts.

Another panel addressed a variety of other ethical issues, with several presenters expressing concerns about focusing on the ability of AI to speed up oral history work. Panelist Stacey Zembrzycki of Concordia University described herself as an AI skeptic and questioned the value of efforts to speedup oral history. The process, she said, is based on listening and building trust, which can be "a long, slow process." While using AI to speed up transcription is becoming widely accepted, she noted, working intensively with transcripts is how you get to know interviewers and narrators and learn what they're trying to tell you. Panel moderator Anna Sheftel, a colleague and collaborator with Zembrzycki, emphasized the importance of understanding oral history as a qualitative, not quantitative, research process. "I really bristle when we call oral history 'data,'" she said.

Several presenters discussed the pros and cons of using AI to conduct oral history interviews, including Brett Halperin of the University of Washington, whose work involved tracking housing insecurity by interviewing people facing eviction during the pandemic. While using an impersonal AI interviewer could help some narrators feel less shame associated homelessness, others found it annoying or dehumanizing to talk to a robot, in addition to noting the limitations in offering emotional support to narrators. "It's never going to give you a hug," he said.

Doug Boyd, director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries, noted at one session that the efficiency and effectiveness of using AI to transcribe interviews has allowed the Nunn Center to pivot from its priority given to indexing to a priority

on transcribing interviews. The volume of interviews in the center's collections previously made transcribing prohibitive. Nonetheless, he noted, there's widespread agreement that regardless of the merits of AI tools for transcribing, human review remains the last step before an interview goes public.

Another panel described efforts to use AI in processing oral histories, including curating the interviews and cataloging them by generating metadata. Juliana Nykolaiszyn of Oklahoma State University described creating a customized ChatGPT tool for use with the university's collection of circus history interviews. She demonstrated the customized tool's ability to answer quickly and accurately a variety of questions, including pulling interesting quotations from PDF transcripts of the interviews, identifying major themes across interviews and other tasks.

Using AI transcription with Black voices was the focus of another panel, whose members reflected on their experiences dealing with such interview transcriptions. Particularly challenging, some said, was the need for basic editing of punctuation, formatting and correcting of speaker identifications in the automated systems.

A panel of presenters from the Rochester Institute of Technology described the nuts and bolts of how they have used Whisper AI for transcription to improve workflows in oral history processing, noting the importance of human review of transcripts as part of the process. RIT's Benjamin Meyers also suggested that as oral historians and other humanities scholars increasingly rely on the use of computationally intensive AI tools, academic oral historians should find out what computer resources their institution has to facilitate those efforts, including possible wait times for computer access.

In a panel on the prospect of using AI to expand options for indexing oral history interviews, OHA past president Michael Frisch noted that technical advances in indexing allow users of interviews to reach into large oral history collections and find things that otherwise might be impossible to do. Moreover, using powerful new indexing capacity thanks to AI will allow researchers and others to do many different things with the same material, thus increasing access to oral histories, he suggested. Frisch also noted that developments in the next few years open up exciting times for oral historians.

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## **"Origin Stories" featured in Lansing historical society summer exhibit**

Oral historians in the upper Midwest might consider a visit to Michigan's Historical Society of Greater Lansing, which is featuring a summer exhibit titled "Origin Stories: How You Got Here."

The exhibit is a collection of oral histories and artifacts that document the arrival of Lansing residents from around the world. It includes the stories told by the son of a Ukrainian shepherd, a family that arrived by way of the Erie Canal, a couple from Alabama who were part of the Great Migration, a survivor of an Indian boarding school and others who made new homes in Lansing after fleeing war, famine and religious oppression or who were inspired by a vision of new opportunities they couldn't find at home.

The exhibit also includes artifacts like photos, letters, jewelry and other treasured objects the Lansing newcomers brought with them over the years. Included in the exhibit is a reproduction of a crazy quilt made by multiple generations of women in the family of longtime OHA member Geneva Kebler Wiskemann. Her great-grandfather immigrated to Michigan in the 1850s, and

Geneva, a retired archivist for the State of Michigan, has maintained the family history for 80 years. You can see an image of the intricate crazy quilt [here](#).

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OHA Newsletters are sent out five times per year. Have a suggestion for content for the newsletter? Email Mary Kay Quinlan at [ohaeditor@gmail.com](mailto:ohaeditor@gmail.com).

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